

Preserving Idlewild's History— the Idlewild Public Library

Today, Idlewild is a designated national historic site. As the era of segregation faded, so did the popularity of Idlewild. However, it remains an important part of African-American and Michigan history. Through the services of the Idlewild Public Library, visitors and Idlewild residents can research the town's history and experience the words and works of the literary Idlewilders listed above.

Read more about Idlewild!

Idlewild: the Black Eden of Michigan
—by Ronald J. Stephens

Black Eden: the Idlewild Community
—by Lewis Walker and Ben C. Wilson

Blue as the Lake: a Personal Geography
—by Robert B. Stepto

Idlewild, Michigan Transformation Initiative

The Idlewild, Michigan Transformation Initiative is a partnership initiative established by Governor Jennifer M. Granholm in 2007 to “create jobs, build a thriving community and ensure a bright future for Idlewild,” building on the powerful collection of historic, cultural and natural assets the region offers. Learn more about the latest initiative plans and progress at:

www.michigan.gov/idlewild

The Library of Michigan is an agency of the Department of History, Arts and Libraries and provides library and information services to the state legislature, government and citizens of Michigan.

The Michigan Center for the Book is a program of the Library of Michigan and its affiliates. More information is available at www.michigan.gov/mcfb.

The Library of Michigan is part of the Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Dedicated to enriching quality of life and strengthening the economy by providing access to information, preserving and promoting Michigan's heritage and fostering cultural creativity, the department also includes the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs and the Michigan Historical Center.

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Idlewild's Literary Heritage



Photo courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

“I have seen the moon rising above the purple waters against the velvet background of tall and silent trees. I have seen the mystery of Dawn...and then — the wide, wild thunder of the rising sun.”

— W. E. B. Du Bois on Idlewild

Idlewild's History

Idlewild was the foremost African-American summer resort in the U.S. during the first half of the 20th century. From the 1910s to the 1960s, Idlewild was a "Black Eden" for African-Americans, who could relax without harassment during the nation's segregated era. As one of the most popular African-American resort areas, musicians and entertainers flocked to the "Apollo of Michigan," where appearances in one of the community's nine clubs began the careers of many celebrities. Performers included Lena Horne, Bill Cosby, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Aretha Franklin, Sammy Davis, Jr., B. B. King, Stevie Wonder and Count Basie, among many others.

Vacationers from places such as Chicago, Detroit, New York and St. Louis came to experience nature and enjoy the lakes and rustic surroundings. They also came to see famous and soon-to-be-famous entertainers side by side with the rich and famous – such as literary figures like novelist Charles Chesnutt, poet Langston Hughes, novelist Zora Neale Hurston and scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois.

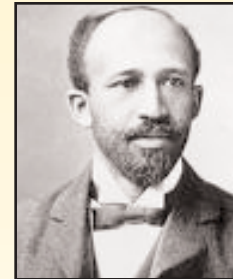
Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858 – 1932)

The first major black novelist, Chesnutt was born in Cleveland. His writing laid a literary foundation for those who followed. His fiction and non-fiction works examine racism in American culture and history. He is best known for his novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, a protest against lynching, and the short stories collection *The Conjure Woman*, a showcase for slave folktales. Chesnutt built a cabin at Idlewild and vacationed there in his later years.



W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 – 1963)

Born in Great Barrington, Mass., Du Bois became one of the 20th century's most prominent black leaders, intellectuals and spokesmen. He was renowned for his essays, poetry, novels and scholarship. A lifelong social activist, he was one of the founders of the NAACP and the editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis*, which is collected in *The Crisis Reader*. He is best known for *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays on the early history of African-Americans. Du Bois was one of the original landowners in Idlewild.



Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967)

Born in Joplin, Mo., Hughes gained fame as a poet, author and playwright and was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He was noted for using dialect and jazz rhythms and focusing on the experience of the urban African-American. His Jesse B. Simple stories were collected in *The Best of Simple* and his poetry was collected in *Selected Poems*. Hughes vacationed in Idlewild, perhaps finding inspiration for his poetry from the musicians there.



Zora Neale Hurston (1903 – 1960)

Born in Eatonville, Fla., Hurston was a folklorist, playwright and novelist. She is best known for her collection of African-American folklore, *Mules and Men*, and her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a story of a young African-American woman's journey to fulfillment. She was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance literary movement. Hurston vacationed in Idlewild.

